

Advent 3

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December 16, 2001

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, you once called John the Baptist to give witness to the coming of your Son and to prepare his way. Grant us, your people, the wisdom to see your purpose today and the openness to hear your will, that we may witness to Christ's coming and so prepare his way; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus 2 it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. 3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; 7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. 8 A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. 9 No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. 10 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Edom is singled out in chapter 34 as representative of the nations who have resisted Yahweh's will and with whom Yahweh is enraged. Edom joined the alliance of Aram and Israel and won its freedom from Judah in 735 b.c. When the Syro-Ephraimite coalition fell, Edom became an Assyrian vassal. Chapter 34 describes Edom's eschatological destruction.

"The chapter [35] consists of a lyrical anticipation of a coming time when all creation will be restored to well-being (vv. 1-2, 6b-7) and the faithful will be healed (vv. 3-4) and brought home safely and joyously (vv. 8-10)... this chapter is intimately joined to the vision of homecoming in chapters 40-55 and contains many parallels in wording and phrasing." [1]

1-2. The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad: The description of Judah's restoration is a description of the rehabilitation of the creation by Yahweh. It matches in detail by the description of Edom's destruction in chapter 34.

3-6b: The weak, feeble, fearful, blind, deaf, lame, speechless will be restored as well.

3: See Hebrews 12:12.

4. Here is your God: See also Isaiah 40:9.

5-6a: See Matthew 11:5 (Luke 7:22), and Acts 26:18. The evangelists saw in this description of the effect Yahweh's acts for his people a foreshadowing of the work and message of Jesus.

6b-7: A continuation of verses 1-2.

8-9. A highway...called the Holy Way: This is the way by which the exiles will return,

not the unclean, but only the faithful, "God's people," "the redeemed," "the ransomed of The Lord."

10. The ransomed of the Lord: The returning exiles. See Revelation 21:4.

Psalm 146:5-10

5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, 6 who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; 7 who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; 8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. 9 The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. 10 The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

The restoration theme from Isaiah is repeated in the Psalm. The Psalm is post-exilic and reflects the joy of the return from exile. Those who trusted Yahweh will be freed and healed. Those who rejoice in the return execute justice for the oppressed, give food to the hungry. Yahweh watches over strangers, upholds the orphan and widow and opens the eyes of the blind, those who are excluded from the community, and lifts up those who are bowed down.

James 5:7-10

7 Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. 9 Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! 10 As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

7. Be patient: The patience of the farmer waiting the crop is advanced as an illustration of the patience of those who wait for the Lord.

9. Beloved, do not grumble against one another:

10. an example of suffering and patience...the prophets: Only two prophets who met with violent deaths are identified by name. Zechariah son of Jehoiada the priest spoke the word of the Lord and was stoned to death at the command of King Joash (2 Chronicles 24:5-22). Uriah son of Shemaiah from Kiriath-jearim prophesied against Jerusalem and against Judah, and King Jehoiakim struck him with a sword and killed him (Jeremiah 26:20-23). In 1 Kings 18:30 and 19:14 reference is made to prophets who were killed, but without any specifics. Short of death, several of the prophets, Jeremiah among them, endured rejection, humiliation and hardship (Jeremiah 20:1-2; 38:6).

[11: This verse is omitted from the lection, though it is a part of the pericope. It calls to mind the endurance of Job, as an example of the patience that is urged on Christians who wait for the coming of the Lord.]

Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." 7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' 11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of

heaven is greater than he.

2. *John...his disciples*: Followers of John did not automatically become Christians. In Acts 18:24ff we have the account of the conversion of Apollos, a Jew of Alexandria, who *knew only the baptism of John*. He had been instructed in *the way of the Lord*, but he was not a Christian. That was 20 plus years after the resurrection.

in prison. John was imprisoned in Herod's fortress at Machaereus, about 3 miles east of the Dead Sea.

3. *Are you the one who is to come...*: John has testified to the superiority of the one who is coming, but he is not sure that Jesus is that one.

4-5: Jesus uses the evidence of Isaiah 35 and Psalm 146, as well as other Old Testament texts as the evidence of who he is.

6. *blessed...who takes no offense*: Jesus does not gain honor at the expense of the oppressed. Instead he brings healing and wholeness.

7-11: Jesus honors John. In spite of his dress and diet; his message, and his present situation, he is a man of great honor. Yet, in the kingdom of heaven, he is the least honorable.

Reflection

In the second lesson the "beloved," those who wait for the return of the Lord, are eager for his return. They are admonished to be patient, not to engage in grumbling or taking precipitate action against others. The prophets, both in their own lives and even more in their writings, are examples of the patience expected of the faithful. What is there to be patient for? The coming of the Lord! He has not returned as quickly as expected (James was probably written in the last half of the first century, 20 to 40 years after the resurrection.) Still, "the kingdom of God or the church will finally triumph under God's supervision without the intervention of men." [2]

Last week we were warned that no one, not even the Son, knew when the end would come. Today, the signs of the presence of the coming one are signs of freedom and peace. Those who are looking for signs of the end are looking for the wrong signs. Instead of natural calamity, political instability and personal immorality we should be looking for the overcoming of physical handicaps, the proclamation of good news to the poor, the freeing of the oppressed. Not only should we look for such things, we should be in the active pursuit of them.

We must also remember that John is *not* the Messiah. He is the forerunner. His preaching is the preaching of one who has come to prepare the way, not the one for whom the way is prepared. So, his proclamation is, by definition, not the proclamation of the Messiah. John preached a baptism of repentance. Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire is a greater baptism, and though John is the greatest on earth, he is least in heaven; the Messiah is greater and his ministry of teaching and healing and blessing is greater than John's ministry of accusation and condemnation.

The delay of the Parousia was a serious problem for Christians in the first century. Jesus had promised, "truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes" (Matthew 10:23); "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (Matthew 16:28); "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place" (Matthew 24:34). And yet, the Son of Man did not come! Patience was the watchword. But the delay continues, many have lost confidence and have given up their faith in the words of the Lord. Today, the lessons renew the call for patience, and point to the present as a time to be aware of the presence of the Lord in the ministry of his sisters and brothers. The Lord will come at an unexpected hour. Our task is not to

know when, but to live each day in expectation and service.

Hymns [3]

With One Voice (e.g. 762v), Hymnal Supplement 1991 (e.g. 725s) and LBW (e.g. 32).

E = Entrance; D = Hymn of the Day; I = First Lesson P = Psalm; II = Second Lesson; G = Gospel

721s-E/I-Awake, (633v)

420--D--Lord, Save Your

35 --D--Hark, the Glad

86 --I--The Only Son

477--P--O God of Jacob

730v --P--My Soul Proclaims

634v --P--Sing of Mary (756s)

629v --II--All Earth Is Hopeful

426, 23, 24, 30, 538

Prayers of the People [4]

P or A: As we wait on the Lord and God's precious grace and mercy, let us bring our own needs and those of others before God saying "Great things have been done for us," and responding "Holy is God's name!"

A: We give thanks for the goodness of God we experience in the Church. Guide our bishop Andrea, and all the leaders of the Church. May your Spirit be poured out upon us all that we may announce the coming of God's reign. Great things have been done for us, Holy is God's name!

A: We pray for the Government and Parliament of Canada. Guide our leaders and people to generosity and concern for others that no one will be forced to live in poverty in this blessed land. Great things have been done for us, Holy is God's name!

A: We pray for those in prisons and for those who work with them, that bitterness and despair may not overtake them. For those who work as chaplains and volunteers, we give thanks and ask that you call more of your people to concern for prisoners, remembering the example of the prophets and apostles and the words of Jesus. Great things have been done for us, Holy is God's name!

A: For those who are afflicted with sickness or fatigue, we pray that your word would be true for them. Strengthen weak hands and knees. Take away fears. Make sorrow and sadness flee away. Great things have been done for us, Holy is God's name!

A: Give us patience as we await your coming and continue in our daily work and preparations for the celebrations to come. Keep us from grumbling and let our hearts be strong in the knowledge that the Lord is near. Great things have been done for us, Holy is God's name!

P: Bring to your faithful people, the ransomed of the Lord, your joy as we wait. May our prayers and praise keep us in the Way of Light with all your saints and martyrs. Amen.

Or [5]

Presider or deacon

As we wait with joy for the glory of the Lord, let us offer prayers to God who opens the eyes of the blind.

Deacon or other leader

For the coming of Jesus Christ in power and glory.

For the coming of Wisdom to teach and guide us.

For the coming of Emmanuel, the hope of all the peoples.

For the peace of the world, and for our unity in Christ.

For N our bishop and all bishops, for the presbyters, for the deacons and all who

minister in Christ, and for all the holy people of God.
For the church throughout the world and the faithful in every place.
For the leaders of the nations and all in authority.
For justice, peace, and freedom among peoples of the earth.
For travelers, for the sick and the suffering, for the hungry and the oppressed, and for those in prison.
For the dying and the dead.
For our deliverance from all affliction, strife, and need.
Joining our voices with the blessed Virgin Mary and with all the saints and angels of God, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ. **To you, O Lord.**

Presider

O Key of David, scepter of the house of Israel, who opens and none can shut, who shuts and none can open, come and free the captives from prison, who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. Glory to you for ever.

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Notes

[1] Walter Bruggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, pp. 274 f.

[2] Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964, p. 54.

[3] <http://www.worship.on.ca/text/rcla9899.txt>

[4] http://www.worship.on.ca/text/inter_a2.txt

[5] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>